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# **Children and Grief: Understanding the Grieving Process and Counseling Strategies of Elementary School Children to Ensure Academic Success**

Georgia Fielding and Jacob Crowder

The 2005 U.S. Bureau of Census states that more than 2 million children and adolescents under the age of 18 have experienced the death of a parent. One of the most stressful events for children and their families is the death of a parent or other loved one. The surviving parent may have difficulty coping with the loss of his or her partner, and this difficulty in coping may affect how the children work through the grieving process. If the children do not deal with grief effectively, they may have to deal with major psychiatric problems and social dysfunctions throughout their childhood and possibly their adult life.

One of the major problems grieving children face is the lack of preparation for loss of others, because many children may not have a clear concept of death and dying. Susan Hamby, lead counselor at Hardaway High School of Columbus, Georgia stated, "The issue of death is hard for a child to relate to because they believe they are immortal; and when a death occurs, it's a shock that they are not prepared to deal with" (personal communication, October 9, 2005).

One counseling strategy to help children prepare for loss is to talk with them about both life and death with the use of "pocket pets" (Flom, 2005). Pocket pets are small animals such as gerbils, hamsters, pet mice, ferrets and small rabbits. On average, pocket pets live two to five years. If the animal is kept in the counseling office students have the opportunity to keep interacting with the pet over the course of its lifetime. "Yet these animals may sicken, and all eventually die, presenting lessons in living and dying more vividly than any book or video" (Flom, 2005). The animal's death gives the students a chance to express feelings about the loss of the animal and their attachment to it.

Lori Beckwith, lead Counselor at River Road Elementary in Columbus, Georgia shares that one of the first preparations for students who are grieving a

loss is to let the teachers immediately know about the situation. "Most teachers are very understanding and will watch for sudden changes" (personal communication, October 11, 2005). This observation can help teachers when they notice a student falling behind in class or missing deadlines. Behavior changes brought on by grief can be almost unnoticeable but can sometimes lead to decreased academic performance. A student who generally makes high academic marks might suddenly begin to receive failing grades or refuse to participate in group activities. Beckwith states, "Teachers will let me (school counselor) know if the strategies I come up with are working or not; and if they are not working, then that may be the time to suggest a counseling referral to an outside source to help the child with coping strategies."

The best way to help students cope with loss is to understand the grieving process relating to children and adolescents. How elementary school children grieve depends on factors such as age, developmental stage, ethnic culture and beliefs, and whether the death was caused by disease, accident, or suicide. Children who are three to five years of age do not understand the permanence of death. They may constantly ask when a deceased person is coming back. Children may also regress to a younger stage of development when the family was in a safer time before the death of the family member. Children may also display grief reaction by developing feeding problems, bed-wetting, constipation, and sleeping problems (Hamrin, & Kirwin, 2005).

Children six to eight years of age may understand that death is universal and permanent. They may have scary ideas about death or become fearful because of magical thinking regarding death. Children may also assume blame and guilt for the death and may not clearly understand why a person



died. Children may believe death was the result of something he or she once wished for when angry.

Children aged nine to eleven may avoid sadness and other strong emotions because grieving would make them different from their peers. They may fear abandonment and the death of the surviving family member. Children of this age may also increasingly express anger and moodiness and perhaps misbehavior after the death of the loved one (Black, 2005).

Children who have long-lasting physical and emotional reactions to death are experiencing "complicated grief" (Black, 2005). Complicated grief is a common form of grieving following the death of a loved one in circumstances that are considered to be objectively or subjectively traumatic. Another term that may be used is Childhood Traumatic Grief (CTG). In CTG children are overwhelmed by the trauma response and are, as a result, unable to accomplish normal grieving tasks. Symptoms may include "post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yearning for the deceased, and lack of acceptance of the death" (Brown, Goodman, & Pearlman, 2004, p.187). Such children may need extensive therapy with highly skilled clinical psychologists or family therapists who specialize in bereavement counseling.

Some adults mistakenly assume children bounce back after a short mourning period. Realistically, all children move through the process of grief at different rates, and in CTG this process may be prolonged for years. The school counselor can help a child through the grief process by providing resources to the child and family. School personnel cannot compensate for a child's severe loss, but they should be prepared to help bereaved students work through the grief process.

The school counselor may create a support team in the community to serve as a useful surrogate support system for families when a parent dies (Black, 2005). Support is essential during this time since death puts tremendous strain on a family's existing coping systems. Counselors may also suggest counseling programs such as talking groups, memory projects, and closure activities. These groups may promote the discussion of

feelings and fears and may also encourage children to share memories of his or her deceased parent.

Beckwith, counselor at River Road Elementary, also understands that elementary school students express grief in many different ways. She says, "Sometimes it's hard for them to articulate their feelings with words" (personal communication, October 11, 2005). Beckwith explained that some students express their grief very successfully through drawing exercises. Students can come to her office and pick up some materials to draw or paint how they are feeling. Sometimes she puts on relaxing music and allows a student to sit quietly in her office. One unique mode of therapy Beckwith uses with a grieving child is to ask the child to write down what's bothering him or her on a piece of paper. The student then wads the paper in to a ball and throws it into the wall. Beckwith says this technique helps channel the child's anger and frustration in a positive and safe manner. She states, "The important thing is providing that outlet for students so that they can express their grief in a positive way instead of acting out."

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines grief as the "deep and poignant distress caused by bereavement." Losing close friends and family is a part of life that no one wants to experience, but because it happens, we all experience grief. "As we face our fears and our sadness, we learn that we can let go of the pain of losing our loved ones, not the love or the relationship itself" (Brown, 2004, p. 197). As school counselors, we must be prepared to assist our students not only with academic issues but also with personal issues such as death and dying.

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